John Dewey Denies the Existence of an Absolute Moral Law

Reason and Conscience the Guides

Columbia Professor Challenges Many Classical Theories of Knowledge

JOHN DEWEY'S Reconstruction in Philosophy (Holt) is a bold challenge to many long established theories of philosophical knowledge. From Plato to Hegel thinkers have generally invoked some transcendental authority for their systems of belief. There have been skeptics and empiricists; but their voices have been vague and confused. The increasing prestige and importance of science in modern life, however, has contributed powerfully to the rise of a new school of philosophic thought. Among the most eminent exponents of this school are Bergson, James and Dewey.

Pragmatism Explained and Defended

Professor Dewey's work is at once a history and a justification of the pragmatic method of thinking. He systematically undermines the foundations of the old philosophy by analyzing its dubious origins, the spurious quality of its values and sanctions. He is frankly skeptical about the existence of the "ultimate truth," which philosophers are apt to claim as their own peculiar property. Philosophy, in his opinion, has a more useful if humbler function than to lose itself in the bottomless depths of metaphysical speculation. So he declares:

"Philosophy which surrenders its somewhat barren monopoly of dealings with ultimate and absolute reality will find a compensation in enlightening the moral forces which move mankind and in contributing to the aspirations of men to attain to a more ordered and intelligent happiness."

Professor Dewey breaks boldly with several long accepted views in his discussion of ethical standards. He completely rejects the conception of absolute moral laws, binding the individual under all circumstances. On the contrary, he contends that each separate phase and expression of human conduct must be judged on its own merits, that the individual must find the solution of his moral problems in his own reason and conscience rather than in any externally imposed, immutable rules. Of course this idea found a very strenuous champion in Friedrich Nietzsche, although it seems incongruous to recall Nietzsche's fierce, passionate, tragic iconoclasm in the presence of Dewey's mildly respectable liberalism.

The author does not believe in setting up the attainment of any quality as the supreme end and goal of human life. He argues that man must find his highest satisfaction in the harmonious pursuit of many ideals:

"It has been repeatedly suggested that the present limit of intellectual reconstruction lies in the fact that it has not as yet been seriously applied in the moral and social disciplines. Would not this further application demand precisely that we advance to a belief in a plurality of changing, moving, individualized goods and ends, and to a belief that principles, criteria, laws, are intellectual instruments for analyzing individual or unique situations?"

Professor Dewey is neither an optimist nor a pessimist. He labels his creed meliorism—the belief that the present evils of life can be gradually mitigated and cured by the proper functioning of science, reason and good will. In social science, as in other fields of thought, the author is averse to sweeping generalities and unchanging principles. He believes in attacking problems as they arise without being bound by preconceived theories of the nature of human society. He protests vigorously against the Helegian method of prostituting philosophy for the purpose of justifying the established social order.

Human Mind More Self-Reliant

The scientific discoveries of the last century constitute a most important development in the liberation of the human intellect from its dependence upon the supernatural. It is no longer an accident or a miracle if a doctor cures a patient, or if the sun suffers an eclipse. Professor Dewey justly mentions this increasing sense of the value of normal experience as an important factor in the making of pragmatism:

"Reason, as a faculty separate from experience, introducing us to a superior region of universal truths, begins now to strike us as remote, uninteresting and unimportant. Reason, as a Kantian faculty that introduces generality and regularity into experience, strikes us more and more as superfluous—the unnecessary creation of men addicted to traditional formalism and to elaborate terminology. Concrete suggestions arising from past experiences, developed and matured in the light of the needs and deficiencies of the present, employed as aims and methods of specific reconstruction and tested by success or failure in accomplishing this task of readjustment, suffice."

Students of philosophy will be intensely interested in this comprehensive statement of Professor Dewey's own viewpoint. The layman will find in the book an unusually simple and understandable analysis of modern philosophical tendencies.

A Republic on the March

Story of the American Frontiersman Told in Dramatic Pages

JUVENAL opened one of his satires with a resonant hexameter which, freely translated, is as follows: "All lands which lie between the Ganges and the Gates of Hercules are Roman."

The frontiers of the greatest empire of antiquity lay in regions shadowed under the mists of speculation and myth. As one closes Professor Frederick J. Turner's The Frontier in American History (Henry Holt & Co.), he will realize with a thrill, if he have the Roman civilization as a background, that the United States is in a degree the modern replica of Rome in the features of frontiers and their shiftings and extendings. Professor Turner shows clearly how inelastic, how without the continued lure of the unknown beyond were and have been the frontiers of all the modern European states.

The Frontier in American History is one of the breveted books of history of 1920. It is without question the most scholarly and readable work on this fascinating phase of our national story that it covers. It is difficult to compress one's review into tight quarters, for each chapter of this book opens up vistas for the imagination and establishes new metes and bounds for study and research. The bibliography, wisely scattered as footnotes marching with the text, is a granary of riches.

We obtain from this book many dramatic pictures of men moving in masses. Sketch for yourself the frontiers of the seventeenth century, straggling lines of Colonial hamlets a few miles west of Boston, New York and sections to the south, clinging to the water's edge. Beyond those pickets lay the forests, the hills, the rivers of a terra incognita, from which emerged at times bands of hostile Indians.

Now leap one hundred years and witness the trails of adventurers going West, marching from New England over the old Mohawk Trail to the Mohawk Valley and then on to the heart of the Seneca district and the shores of the Great Lakes, the early ripples of the tide of men from fields east of the Berkshires who were to push on ultimately to the wheatlands of the Northwest. Further south Scotch-Irish and Germans, progressing by way of Lancaster, Pa., and Bedford to the forks of the Ohio and the Monongahela, were to meet the pioneers of Massachusetts drifting down the Ohio to found Marietta, the first town of the State of Ohio.

Still further south, through the Cumberland Pass and trickling over the hills of the Carolinas, the men of the rifle and the buckskin were taking and holding the areas of Kentucky and Tennessee, with the great central basin of the Mississippi just at their finger tips.

There came a day when the cry that gold had been found in California rang through to the Atlantic coast. Then the frontier became, suddenly, a thing of mist, wavering, receding, as prairie-schooners toiled to the Rockies and over them to the gold region that faced the Pacific. The day of the settlement, the conquest of the vast interior of the United States, was at hand. The story of the American frontier at once became one of organized establishments of villages and towns in the plains between the Mississippi and the Rockies, to be followed by chapters on agrarian years, mining years and the dawn of an industrial era in the heart of North America.

We have but hinted at the highlights of this book, so splendidly, vividly American. Read it and know what it is to be a citizen of a republic always on the march.

A Tribute From Clemenceau

Speaking of John Graham Brooks's work, published by the Macmillan Company, M. Clemenceau said:

"Labor's Challenge to the Social Order is a very remarkable work. I have read the book and shall reread it.

"For the faith and the will to present the truth as it is to both sides, to disengage this ore of truth from its matrix, there is needed the highest degree of clear-sightedness and impartiality as well as serene simplicity in the exposition. Of all this Mr. Brooks has given wonderful proof."

The New Freedom of Women

Its Growth Is Well Illustrated in Louis Couperous's Novel

MODERN fiction, at least Continental fiction, has recently discovered that woman is no longer a passive agent in love, and in eager pursuit of that formula is turning out a quantity of novels in which the romantic adventurings of women are as wide and as various, or a trifle more so, as those of its heroes have ever been. Not a large part of this fiction is deeply informed with inspiration or genuine insight into the nature of women, but a good deal of it is interesting and at least a fair approximation of truth.

Of this sort of revealing of the modern woman is The Inevitable (Dodd, Mead & Co.), by Louis Couperous, whose skill in the craftsmanship of the novel is perhaps a little greater than the common. His heroine is a young woman, a divorcée, who has gone to find in the antiquity and beauty of Rome some solace for her disillusionment. Here she does not find precisely that austere comfort for which she believed herself to be searching, but a lover, a young fellow countryman, a Dutch artist residing in Rome. He is fine fibered and gentle, an idealist who comprehends her desire to be free and self-respecting, and she finds in her life with him an ideal quality of which there was never even a glint in her stormy life with her husband.

In this air she grows clearer-minded, even intellectual. She even becomes a figure in the feminist world by the force of her writing. And all the while she grows as well in emotional subtlety and potency—until in her combination of freedom and restraint she presents a baffling figure to the young Italian prince who falls in love with her and is rebuffed.

Her life seems set in new and flowing lines, when suddenly she meets again her husband. He is a lieutenant of the hussars, a bully, who had degraded her by his brutality and coarseness. Nevertheless, at the first crack of the whip from him her new world falls in ruins about her. At the first manifestation of his will over her she renounces all her dreams and returns with him abjectly. She foresees no happiness with him, she knows herself to be degraded by him, but he exerts a power over her by sheer force of his masculine virility that leaves her no will of her own, no choice.

The Inevitable is in that sensitized, artificially-heightened key of eroticism, that close, indoor, wholly urban atmosphere of studio and drawing room, which the French knew so well to project. Couperous has mastered the French idiom of writing, though he himself is Dutch. The relation of this sort of writing is closer to literature than to life.

A Long Short Story

Julian Street's Humor Makes Another Good Yarn

SUNBEAMS, INC., is a long short story by Julian Street, made much more readable published in book form (Doubleday, Page & Co.) than when pursued originally through the latter pages of a magazine. Mr. Street's cynical type of humor does not stop with a mere humorous idea and situation. He continues to be funny while he is preparing the tale, he is concluding it and while it is actually going on. Yet if the book were a little less clever and a little more kindly we might be sorry rather than glad when the final chapter is written.

Mr. Street has no sympathy for his central figure and expects none from the reader. He carries H. Bell Brown, journalist, advertising engineer, professional egotist, through ten abbreviated chapters without discovering one redeeming feature in his character. Perhaps H. Bell Brown would have appeared more human if he had revealed a single soft spot, if he had paled when a woman screamed, listened attentively to the purr of a gray kitten. But Mr. Street permits no slip-up in his iron-clad formula in depicting a contemptible hero.